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Topic: THE CHANGING CIA



By David Tellez, USA TODAY
 William Webster

William Webster, 66, has been director of central intelligence for three years. Previously, he directed the FBI for nine years and served as U.S. Appeals Court judge. He also served in the Navy as a lieutenant in World War II and Korea. Webster was interviewed about the post-Cold War direction of the CIA by members of USA TODAY's editorial board and News and Money staffs.

CIA's next job: Guard economic strength

USA TODAY: Why do we need a CIA in a world that seems to be growing more stable every day?

WEBSTER: It is silly for me to debate that kind of issue. The important thing, though, is that we not continue to target an enemy that is no longer there or to target problems that have changed.

USA TODAY: What new problems will the CIA face?

WEBSTER: An example would be transnational issues

that have not occupied center stage in the past, but which could very well act to upset the stability that is emerging from the change in East-West orientation. You think of missile, biological, chemical proliferation, and narcotics. I think also how important it is that we understand the economic factors that are working in the world today and be able to translate that into useful material for policymakers.

USA TODAY: In what way?

WEBSTER: That means, both overtly and covertly, collecting economic intelligence to permit our policymakers to make wise decisions in the interest of our country and to keep the playing field as level as possible. Knowing what our competition is doing and being able to confront it or confound it, whichever the case may be.

USA TODAY: What do you mean by "economic intelligence"?

WEBSTER: Increasingly, economic interrelationships affect stability and, hence, national security. We want to be on top of the trends, the resources and constraints of nations and regions, financial transactions and technology.

USA TODAY: What about technology?

WEBSTER: Who has it? Who's going after it? What it means in terms of competitive ability for American businesses. We need to know what the other fellows are doing to us in terms of technology transfer. And, to a degree, efforts to steal important business technology that could upset America's lead in key areas.

USA TODAY: That sounds like industrial spying.

WEBSTER: We're not turning to the business of spying on business. What we are turning to is a better and richer understanding of those economic trends that affect us all.

USA TODAY: But won't you uncover information valuable to U.S. businesses?

WEBSTER: As we gather the kind of encyclopedic information that I've described and as we seek to understand intentions, particularly of countries that are guiding their private-sector development technically, some information invariably will come to us.

USA TODAY: Will you pass it on to our businesses?

WEBSTER: We are not going to pick up the phone, call General Motors and say, "I have a hot tip for you." The question that's yet unanswered is how to deal with that information.

USA TODAY: Would it be all right for the Japanese to do the same to us?

WEBSTER: That's a little like asking me if it's all right for the KGB to do the same thing we're doing. I think we should not deny our country and its players a level playing field.

USA TODAY: Is there still a military threat to our national security?

WEBSTER: I've given testimony on the nature of the threat and on the reversibility of that threat. But I never said there was no threat. I never said that the Soviet strategic capability wasn't as strong today as it was a year ago. We're in a time of important transition.

USA TODAY: If the CIA gets heavily into economic intelligence, won't its basic responsibilities suffer? The record hasn't been very good in predicting events in Eastern Europe, Tiananmen Square,

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or locating the hostages in Lebanon.

WEBSTER: I don't subscribe to your hypothesis. The finished intelligence that has been supplied to the government and viewed by the intelligence committees has been pretty darn good at identifying trends and conditions.

USA TODAY: There are reports the CIA is often involved with drug traffickers. Does the end justify the means?

WEBSTER: We have not engaged in drugs, we don't support people who engage in drugs and we will communicate any information we have about drugs to the proper authorities. The CIA has no right to withhold any kind of information on illegal activities against U.S. citizens.

USA TODAY: You don't anticipate anything embarrassing to the CIA coming out of Manuel Noriega's trial?

WEBSTER: No. My knowledge of our relationship with Noriega was correct and important. It produced useful information and the amounts paid were quite modest.

USA TODAY: What do you say to published allegations that the CIA may have contributed to the fraudulent activities of at least 22 S&Ls and that some of the money was sent to support the contras?

WEBSTER: Absolutely crazy. There is nothing to support this rumor at all. The CIA is a convenient lightning rod for people who are trying to deflect attention from what they are doing to something else.

USA TODAY: You're saying there was no CIA involvement in any of the failed S&Ls?

WEBSTER: Our records reflect no CIA involvement with any type of activity that would in any way influence the S&L industry.

USA TODAY: Do you expect cuts in intelligence spending?

WEBSTER: Yes, there will be reductions. It's inevitable, realistically, that we will be taking cuts in our budget because we're locked into the defense budget. But at a time when so much is changing, the ability to understand those changes and provide important information that's useful and timely to our policymakers and to analyze it effectively has never been greater.